

AFEHRI File 19-5-1-20

Research Materials/Source Documents

FILE TITLE: Air Force Cross Recipient: CMSgt Richard L. Etchberger

Reviewed by:

AFEHRI Representative *[Signature]* date 7 Jun 98

EPC Representative *[Signature]* date 22 Jun 98

Scanner Operator *[Signature]* date 22 Jun 98

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Etched in the stone of the Vietnam War Memorial Wall in Washington D.C. is the name Richard L. Etchberger, CMSgt, USAF. The chief was posthumously awarded the Air Force Cross, our nation's second highest military decoration for extraordinary heroism and the Purple Heart for wounds sustained during combat Air Force Chief of Staff General John P. McConnell presented both decorations to Chief Etchberger's widow in a private ceremony.

On March 11, 1968, the chief was mortally wounded during rescue atop Phou Pha Thi in Laos. At the time he was not a member of the Air Force having been discharged and hired outside Department of Defense in order to serve his country in a covert operation in Laos. He and eleven other "ex-Air Force" personnel wore a grey uniform resembling a flight suit and non-government issue boots. Since they no longer carried their Armed Forces identification card, the men were issued State Department identification cards. The men were not even allowed to wear their Air Force issued dog tags. It was very important not to be connected in any way to the Department of Defense since at the time the United States denied being in Laos. Some of the men working at Phou Pha Thi also known as Lima Site 85 were given a cover story to use in the event they were ever captured. Despite operating in, for lack of any other word to describe the site, a war zone, the men were not issued any type of defensive weapon from the outfit they served. This, however, did not mean the men did not have their own personal weapons. It did mean however, that most of the weapons the men acquired were in poor working order. Many of the American made M-16s were prone to jamming. Exactly what motivated these men to disconnect from the Air Force is unclear. Some men may have been lured by the extra money to be made and for others it could have been the sheer excitement of being part of a covert operation. Whatever the underlying motivation was, they were true patriots and fully cognizant of the extra risks involved.

The chief was deployed in support of operation HEAVY GREEN, providing precision radar bombing in North Vietnam and Laos. Keeping the site operational was the job of CMSgt Etchberger and his eleven comrades. In mid 1967 steps were taken to establish the TSQ-81 facility atop a 5500 foot ridge called Phou Pha Thi. The TSQ-81 was a modified version of SAC's Radar Bomb Scoring System but instead of predicting bomb impact points for simulated drops this system directed and controlled attacking fighter jets and bombers to their targets by providing aircraft with precise bomb release points under radar control. This system was also known as combat skyspot. A tactical air navigation facility had already been established atop Phou Pha Thi having been operational since August 1966. Similar systems existed in South Vietnam and one in Thailand but Lima Site 85 with its navigation aid and combat skyspot was the only facility of its kind in Laos providing ground vectored radar bombing in the northern target areas of both North Vietnam and Laos. The navigation aid was also known as Channel 97 to aircrews. The loss of this facility would seriously hamper operations and result in the substantial impairment of air strikes and support forces in carrying out their missions against the enemy in North Vietnam and Laos. This was true for all seasons, but in particular for the Northeast Monsoon season when the weather over North Vietnam generally turned unfavorable for air operations by mid-October and did not begin improving until April.

Meo guerrillas trained by American personnel provided the primary force for defense of Lima Site 85. If these defenders came under heavy enemy attack and loss of the site appeared imminent, plans called for evacuating the American personnel manning the facilities and destroying the equipment to keep it from falling into enemy hands.

The enemy recognized the importance of Lima Site 85 as far back as Oct 1967 before it became operational. Two "would be" agents with a camera were apprehended just as they reached the summit of Phou Pha Thi. However, an investigation revealed that the suspects were Buddhist Monks and intended no harm. On 10 Jan 1968 a five man enemy patrol was discovered only two kilometers north of the site at the base of the ridge. Two days later The People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) launched an unusual attack. Two antiquated Russian built An-2 colt bi-planes equipped with gunpods, rockets, and mortars dropped what looked like 250 pound bombs as they passed over Lima Site 85. An Air America helicopter came around and shot one of the colts out of the air and the other apparently crashed into a mountain dodging ground fire. The navigation aid and combat skyspot were left unharmed. In March the enemy built up forces around the site but the American personnel kept doing their job.

For the most part good weather prevailed on March 10th and 11th. On the evening of March 10th just after 6:00pm, mortar, artillery and rocket rounds began falling on the defenders of Phou Pha Thi. Early in the barrage, the 105mm Howitzer position near the summit of Phou Pha Thi sustained a direct hit. The living quarters next to the navigation aid and combat skyspot suffered some damage, and by 6:30pm the technicians left their posts to seek shelter in a bunker just north of the living quarters. Just before the men left for the shelter of the bunker, one of the men notified the Tactical Air Control Center (TACC) at Udorn AB, Thailand, of the attack and reported they were abandoning the radio. The senior American in the command bunker using a portable radio maintained the only contact to the control center.

At Udorn, plans rapidly developed to divert sorties to Lima Site 85. Flare ships were

needed to allow for visual strikes because the site could no longer do its primary mission of directing airstrikes. Airborne A-26s had already been diverted and additional tanker support would be required for the eight flights of F-4s being sent to Udorn.

Then as suddenly as it began, the barrage ceased. It was 7:45pm and, cautiously, the technicians left the shelter of the bunker to resume operating the equipment. The navigational aid's antenna sustained some minor shrapnel damage but luckily there were no American casualties. By 7:50pm many of the flights in process of being diverted returned to their original missions. By 8:20pm the circumstances were serious enough to authorize the site to use "clear" voice transmissions while directing sorties. At 9:00pm, heavy fighting was reported at Ban Pha Thi, a village at a lower elevation on the Phou Pha Thi ridge, only one and one-half kilometers south of Lima Site 85. Allegedly, the enemy was using flashlights to facilitate their climb to the village. By 9:17pm, fighting was going on within a half-hour walk from Phou Pha Thi.

An entry in the Tactical Air Control Center log noted that at 9:05pm a great deal of consideration was being given to evacuating the personnel from Site 85 at first light. However, the actual decision was not made at this time. The evacuation should only be made as a last resort.

At 9:21pm, intermittent mortaring and shelling of the outlying positions around Lima Site 85 begun again, but personnel continued to operate and direct missions. Shortly after this resumption of shelling, it was agreed that a partial evacuation of the American personnel was needed. Nine personnel were to be evacuated at 8:15am on March 11th.

The situation remained static at the site until about 3:00am. On the lower slopes of the ridge, sporadic but violent firefights broke out. However, the enemy had not yet succeeded in overrunning any major outposts. As a matter of fact, the senior American at the site later commented that the Meo "... defenders gave a good account of themselves and they held fast under heavy incoming fire." Back at the facilities, the technicians continued to operate the facilities. While one crew operated the combat skyspot facility, some of the other men tried to get some sleep for the next shift. Since the living quarters had been damaged and sometime later the technicians' bunker had also been hit, some of the "off duty" technicians took their sleeping bags and descended the slings to a cliff on the ridge. The slings were only a few feet away from one of the entrances to the supply and communications building.

Shortly after 3:00am on March 11th a slew of either automatic weapons fire, shelling or both caused the crew to abandon the facility in haste for a second time. At this point all radio contact with the facility and personnel was severed. As the technicians came running out of the operations structure, they were met with a hail of small arms automatic weapons fire from close range. These men scrambled for safety down the slings which were only a few feet away. Three of the American technicians had been killed at once--among them the site's senior officer and commander.

A small force of approximately twenty North Vietnamese troops had somehow infiltrated the summit. How they made it to the summit is still a mystery. Possibly the enemy infiltrated the more gradual but very treacherous Northeastern side of Phou Pha Thi or that this small force scaled the almost sheer Northwestern face, a feat most believe to this day to be impossible to

achieve. None of the outposts were aware of this enemy force atop the summit. Seemingly familiar with the layout of the site, the invaders methodically threw grenades into most of the buildings.

At about 3:15am, the senior American in the command bunker near the helipad observed the navigation aid beacon going up in smoke, taken out by a mortar round. Meanwhile the helipad area was under particularly heavy shelling and small arms fire. Soon enemy troops at the site discovered the escape slings leading down the slope to the cliff where the rest of the men lay in wait. The men were trapped, as the enemy directed their automatic weapons fire in the direction of the American technicians. Some of the men down the slope were able to return the fire. After pulling back from the American line of fire from below, the attackers responded by lobbing some 15 to 20 grenades onto the slope and then intermittently spraying the area with automatic weapons fire. Most American casualties occurred at this time. However, the trapped men fought the enemy until first light.

The rescue would begin at 8:15am. Incoming reports indicated that air support was sufficient, weather was good, and the situation remained static. Although unaware of the fate of the facilities, the control center would later become cognizant of the increased enemy fire being directed at the site. Hence, the rescue would begin at 7:15am to evacuate all Americans from Lima Site 85. A message relayed said "At 10:40pm heavy mortar and small arms fire on top of Phou Pha Thi. Embassy ordered evacuation of all repeat all US personnel. [senior American] estimates their outer positions will hold but place untenable as operating the radar site. TACAN (navigational aid) unit reported burning and damaged to other TSQ (radar bombing) equipment.

Steps being taken to destroy all remaining equipment prior to evacuation."

At 620am smoke had been observed rising from the navigational aid site. At about 6:50am, the helicopters were hovering nearby, ready to come in, but were drawing enemy fire from the summit of Phou Pha Thi. The senior American with ten Meo guerrillas proceeded to the combat skyspot and navigation aid facility to find out what was happening and try to determine where the fire directed at the helicopters was coming from.

Upon arrival at the navigation aid location, the senior American found the living quarters locked and the beacon and facility severely damaged. He then called out to any Americans who might have been hiding nearby, but he received no response. Coming around the west side of the complex, shots he exchanged with one enemy soldier dressed in a typical North Vietnamese-Pathet Lao uniform. After circling further south and west, he encountered two more of the enemy, one manning a machine gun behind sandbags. Fire was exchanged and one of the enemy was hit. Then the small friendly force retreated down the hill toward the command bunker and enroute, the senior American was wounded slightly in the leg.

Then, shortly before 7:00am, the enemy incoming fire ceased. Finally, the helicopters were able to come in and begin rescuing the survivors after several gun positions had been silenced. An all-out effort by the American rescue forces was begun to assist and exfiltrate the survivors. Fourteen Firefly (A-1E strike aircraft) and six Sandy (A-1 search and rescue aircraft) sorties struck enemy positions. Also they controlled flights by air and covered rescue helicopters in the area. Back at the bunker, the senior American estimated that either the TSQ-81 was in



enemy hands or they were conducting a raid. That's when friendly heavy weapons fire was directed at the TSQ-81 site and some hits were scored by the A-1Es. The A-1Es in the area noted that the defenders were firing. Unfortunately, the A-1E attack forced one enemy soldier to scurry for safety down the slope and enroute, he engaged in a firefight with an American survivor, killing him.

Forward air controllers directed the helicopters to the cliff where the men were trapped. The helicopter crews realized that there wasn't any place for their choppers to land. They decided to lower the hoist to pick up as many people as possible. This was considered a dangerous undertaking because the helicopter had to hover at edge of the 5,500 foot ridge where the men were trapped. Helicopter aircrews located Five of the American technicians by using an emergency radio and four of them were picked up by Air America helicopters after being helped into the hoist by CMSgt Etchberger. One Air Force Jolly Green Giant picked up the Chief with the Sandies suppressing heavy enemy fire as much as possible. Nevertheless, the Chief was mortally wounded. He had given no thought to his own safety as he helped each of the remaining technicians into the hoist. CMSgt Etchberger is a true patriot. He put his Country and his fellow comrades ahead of himself.

Of the nineteen Americans at the site, the helicopters extracted only seven Americans. Six of the the American were wounded. CMSgt Etchberger, being hit while in the helicopter. The Chief died enroute to safety. The remaining eleven Americans at the Site were presumed dead.

As early as 9:40am on March 11th the control center at Udorn AB, Thailand had begun